

Domino Effect Continues Across Middle East

Tunisia set off a chain reaction across the Middle East and North Africa as citizens of Arab countries began to rise up and call for an end to their current government regimes.

Ted Esler, executive vice president with Pioneers, says, "I don't believe that the main push is for an open society, as much as it is for an end to dictatorship. When we think of democracy being a great thing, we tend to think of democracy with a few assumptions, one of those assumptions being 'freedom of religion.'"

Since mid-January, there have been major protests throughout Yemen, Egypt, Algeria and Jordan. Smaller-scale demonstrations occurred in Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, Oman, Sudan and Libya.

New leadership leaves everything on the table. "On the one hand, I think a number of them are saying that this is going to open society up more," says Esler. He goes on to say, "I hear other leaders saying the opposite, that this could be an opening, for example, for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and things will get much more difficult."

Since everything is in flux in the Arab world, there's opportunity for change and hope for progress. Esler is cautiously optimistic. "We're still in that time where we really don't know where it's going to go. My personal belief is that it's not going to be evenly distributed. In other words, there are going to be some countries where, in four or five years, we're going to see greater openness and a greater ability for missionaries—whether they are indigenous missionaries or foreign missionaries—to work, and there'll be other countries where it'll be much more difficult."

There's concern that the wave of pro-democracy protests engulfing the Arab world could spread even more. That's not surprising, notes Esler, considering that "these reforms are happening because of repression. It's a real issue. They're crying out for change because it's been repressive, so pray that justice would prevail."

How severely will the turmoil upset their outreach work? It's disruptive, he says, but not disabling. "Because so many of our staff are focused on helping the national church do its job there, they're able to continue to minister by proxy through people that are still on the ground."

However, partners on the ground are asking for prayer. Looting and arson often follow the large-scale chaos. "Pray for the safety of the workers that are there. A lot of times when there's lawlessness like we're seeing, for example, in Egypt right now, it's an opportunity for somebody to take out a personal vendetta."

People begin asking the deeper questions when everything in their lives turns upside down. Through their partners, Arab World Media and Global Response Management System (GRMS), they can reach out to truth seekers with the hope of Christ. "It's very evident that internet strategies are very powerful tools in restricted access countries. I have a feeling that these media ministries that use everything from the internet to television to cell phone texting and other types of strategies, are going to become even more important and more prevalent."

Pray that the Holy Spirit would work in people's lives so that they might see the truth. "Then [pray for] wisdom that the leaders in the various churches and various mission movements there would be wise in how to go about their ministries at this crucial time."